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OCI No. 6298  
Copy No. 13

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF CURRENT INTELLIGENCE  
22 September 1954

TO: Deputy Director (Intelligence)

SUBJECT: Syrian Elections to be Held on 24 September

Significance for the United States: For the past seven months Syria has had provisional governments lacking authority and power to take action on foreign policy issues of concern to the United States. Elections should establish a responsible government capable of at least adopting a policy on, for example, Middle Eastern defense and the Jordan River valley development plan.

The Background: On 25 February 1954 an army revolt overthrew the four-year-old military dictatorship of General Adib Shishakli, replacing it with a caretaker government under Prime Minister Asali, who was made responsible for holding parliamentary elections. These were promised for June, then July, but because of political pressures Asali was replaced by Said al Ghazzi on 19 June. Al Ghazzi scheduled elections for 20 August, but political pressure again forced postponement to 24 September.

The Stakes: Immediately at stake are 142 seats in Syria's unicameral legislature--the Chamber of Deputies--and the office of the presidency, which is to be filled by vote of the chamber.

Really at stake, however, is constitutional government run by civilians. Army elements are prepared to take over the government again, as Shishakli did in 1949, if the politicians fail to establish an effective government. The current bitter struggle between the old-line conservative politicians and extreme radical elements indicates that the socio-economic character of Syria is also at stake.

The Participants: The conservative forces are the Nationalists, the Populists and numerous independents.

1. The Nationalists, led by ex-president Shukri Quwatli--who has just returned from five years of exile--are largely associated with the winning of independence from France in 1943. They were discredited by their administration of the government thereafter and were also

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Class. Changed To:	TS S C
Auth.:	HR 70-2
Date:	18 Sept 78
By:	

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charged with losing the war with Israel. Now, attempting a comeback, Quwatli is appealing for nonpartisan support. His "general national union" has collapsed, however, and consequently, conservatives are entering separate rather than combined electoral lists. The Nationalists are the strongest single force.

2. The Populists, led by the Rushdi Kikhya and Nazim al Qudsi, broke away from the Nationalists over domestic policy. The Populists are more liberal, but have recently been politically inept.

3. Most prominent among the independents is Khalid al Azm, a former prime minister.

The chief radical elements are the Arab Socialist-Resurrectionist Party and the Communists.

1. The Arab Socialists, led by Akram Hawrani, enjoy considerable army support and have successfully exploited the weaknesses of the old-line politicians.

2. The Communists, enjoying political freedom under a caretaker government, are running several candidates, including their leader Khalid Bakdash.

Probable Outcome: A Nationalist victory--a relatively stable, moderately pro-Western government.

1. The growing leftist threat has sufficiently sobered the conservatives to make unlikely their risking another postponement of the elections.

2. The conservatives should have no difficulty in defeating the radicals, provided--as appears probable--army elements do not take last-minute action in their behalf.

3. The Nationalists seem likely to win at least a plurality, with smaller Populist and independent blocs and even smaller radical representation. Quwatli would then be the leading candidate in what may be a tight race for the presidency. Other presidential aspirants are Khalid al Azm and Prime Minister Said al Ghazzi.

4. A conservative government--either by the Nationalists or a coalition--would be basically but unenthusiastically pro-Western. While Syria would then have a government,

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Syrian politicians have much to learn before they can  
put to rest the threat of another military dictatorship.

  
Acting Assistant Director  
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